

THE MONTANA FISH AND GAME COMMISSION'S STAND ON THE
BUREAU OF RECLAMATION'S PROPOSED JEFFERSON-WHITEHALL PROJECT
(Reichle Dam)

The Fish and Game Commission has taken the stand that the Big Hole River should be maintained in its free-flowing condition. This stand means opposition to the Jefferson-Whitehall Project and this opposition has been misconstrued by some to mean we oppose irrigation in Montana as such. This is not so. The Commission has not set itself up as an expert in the field of what lands should be irrigated, but it does deem itself qualified when it comes to saying which trout streams are best and in turn the most important to the state's economy.

We oppose the Jefferson-Whitehall Project because the construction of Reichle Dam would cause an irreparable loss to Montana's world-famous stream trout fishery. These losses are: 10 miles of the Big Hole River which will be lost completely from flooding by Reichle Reservoir; 24 miles of the Big Hole from the upper end of the reservoir to Divide Dam in which fishing will be partially damaged by an increased population of rough fish moving up from the reservoir; 9 miles of the Big Hole from Reichle Dam to the Whitehall Diversion which could be made unfishable by high and variable flows for part of the year; and 8 miles of the Big Hole from Whitehall Diversion to its mouth where fishing is also likely to be damaged by high and variable flows for a part of the year. Thus, although the total loss of 10 miles of this stream would be the most serious effect of this project, the entire, 51-mile, blue-ribbon section of the Big Hole River is threatened by some degree of damage.

We cannot tie a dollar and cents value to what this damage would be. While we do know that Montana streams are now below their maximum potential in fisherman day use, both future levels of use and the future dollar value of a fisherman day cannot be accurately determined. The rate of increase of the general population and of anglers is not accurately known. The effects of improved transportation cannot be predicted. No one knows how far an angler would come or what he would be willing to pay to fish in the world's best trout streams 25, 50 or 100 years in the future. All the federal agencies engaged in water development work have agreed on a system of assigning dollar values to present fisherman day use, dependent upon the type and quality of fishing. This system even now rates the best stream fishing twice as high as the best reservoir fishing. We expect this difference will increase in the future as acres of reservoirs increase and miles of trout streams decrease. Also accurate predictions of all effects from a project is not possible from proposed plans. Past experience on other water development projects has shown us that the plans we are given to review are tentative and that they may have little resemblance to actual project operations. In spite of promises given to conservation agencies on past projects, power and irrigation needs are first fully served before fish and wildlife are considered.

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service has mentioned some possible fishery benefits from the Jefferson-Whitehall Project. These possible benefits have been used to help sell the project and to discredit our estimate of the losses Montana's fishery would sustain. It is unfortunate that controversy over this point has obscured the really important issues. These are:

1. Both the Montana Fish and Game Department and the Fish and Wildlife Service agree that fishing in the Jefferson River could be improved by raising historical flows a certain amount, but at the same time unseasonably high flows during the fishing season could hurt fishing.

2. Neither agency has received satisfactory assurance that beneficial flow improvements will be provided by the Jefferson-Whitehall Project.
3. Regardless of whether such flows could be assured, both the Montana Fish and Game Department and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service are united in the stand that the Jefferson-Whitehall Project should not be authorized for construction because it would destroy completely 10 miles of one of the nation's finest trout streams.

The following conservation organizations have also taken this stand: Sport Fishing Institute, Trout Unlimited, the Montana Wildlife Federation, the Western Division of the American Fisheries Society and the Western Association of Game and Fish Commissioners. The reason for this agreement among conservation agencies is easy to see. They all feel a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. They prefer the Big Hole as it is to taking a chance of losing it for the hopeful improvement of a downstream fishery of lower value. If we are going to try to improve low flows in the Jefferson River lets do it by damming less important sites than the best part of the Big Hole River.